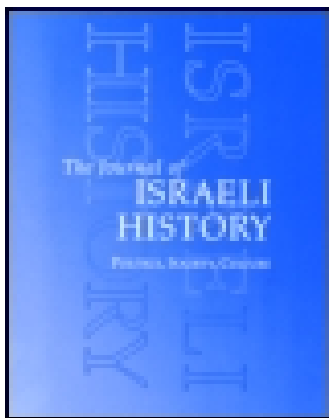


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The Italian Government's Response to the Problem of Jewish Refugees 1945–1948*

Jacob Markovizky

ITALY WAS THE MAIN TRANSIT COUNTRY for the stream of Jewish refugees from Europe to Palestine at the end of World War II. Out of the 65 daring blockade-runner ships sailing in the direction of Palestine, 21 left Italian ports with 21,000 refugees.¹ These refugees constituted one-third of all those who arrived by means of winding mountain paths or similar difficult tracks. They played an important role in the epic rebirth of Israel through their illegal immigration from Italy to Palestine, despite restrictions imposed by the British government's White Paper of May 1939.

When it became apparent that Italy was becoming the main transit country for the flow of survivors of the war and the Holocaust on their way to Palestine, the British government was forced to formulate and adopt a policy to prevent their illegal entry. The complicated relations that prevailed between the British government and the Italian authorities in Rome, together with the changes occurring during this period (in particular the infiltration of tens of thousands of Jewish refugees into Italy) forced the British government to find a solution for the problem of the refugees. The British government, therefore, tried to influence the Italian government to prevent the Jewish refugees' entry into Italy. This article will examine the Italian government's policy towards the Jewish refugees who tried to enter through Italy's northern borders.²

Politically, the Italian government found itself between Scylla and Charybdis: on one hand, the Italian authorities were forced to close the gates of immigration due to the heavy political pressure from the British

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1 For details on these immigration ships, see Gaby Sarig, *The Gideons in the Immigration Ships* (Hebrew), Efal, 1988, pp. 10–18.

2 See the discussion of Ministero Dell'Interno (1946), Busta 254, Fascicolo 24855, Archivio Centrale Dello Stato, Rome (hereafter ACS). On the debates of the Comitato Generale on the "Jewish refugees' Organization in Italy," see Files of Ministry of the Interior, Busta 80, Fascicolo 14105, ACS. See also Isaac S. Minervi, "Between the Italian Authorities and the Jewish Refugees," *Paths of Rescue and Immigration — The Central Committee for the Diaspora in Italy 1944–1948* (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv, 1985, pp. 21–22. For a short exhaustive discourse on the policy against infiltration of Jewish refugees in the area of Venezia — Giulia, see Menahem Shelah, *The Yugoslavian Connection — Yugoslavia and Illegal Immigration 1938–1948* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv 1994, pp. 162–170.

government and the increasing economic and social difficulties after World War II. On the other hand, the government was striving to rid Italy of its former fascist past, and show sympathy towards the Jews by extending a helping hand to aid them on their way to their ancient homeland.

In the summer of 1945, thousands of refugees began to leave Austria from the Tyrol area and enter Italy via the steep, twisting paths of the Alps. The main wave of refugees fled into the Tarvisio-Bolzano district. In 1946, the small town of Merano became the center for refugees who arrived from Austria through the Nauders-Resia passes.³ This brisk movement of Jewish refugees through the border brought their number to about 20,000 according to estimates of the local authorities in early 1946.⁴

The Italian government, therefore, faced a dilemma. It was clear that Italy would not benefit from the hungry and penniless refugees entering their country. Furthermore, the central authorities in Rome were being pressured by the British government to forbid the illegal entry of Jewish refugees and to stop those who had entered from departing to Palestine. Nevertheless, the socialist government that came to power after the war wished to help the Jewish refugees as an expression of sympathy with the victims of fascism and a manifestation of atonement for the atrocities of the fascist regime. There was also some political interest in supporting the aims of the Zionist movement, since it could strengthen Italy's position and consolidate its influence in the Middle East as part of the larger "Medio Oriente" policy.⁵

In this complex situation, the Italian government chose to turn a blind eye to the influx of Jewish refugees. While only a few entry permits were issued officially, large numbers of refugees actually did enter the country unofficially. It is clear that the border police received unofficial instructions not to be too strict with the refugees arriving in Italy without visas.⁶ There-

3 Report of the Joint Allied Commission on Means to Prevent Infiltration of Jewish Refugees into Italy, 4 October 1947, Fascicolo 1, Busta 18, ASC (hereafter Report of the Joint Allied Commission). See Sami Levy to Moulia (Ben-Haim), 20 August 1948, c 12/9/10, Heritage Archive (hereafter HA), "Yad Yaari," Givat Haviva. On the difficulties in the paths of infiltration, see Jonathan Adar, *Doubles — In the Mission of Secret Rescue* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1990, pp. 58–59.

4 Memorandum of the Minister of Interior, summer 1946, Busta 254, Fascicolo 24855, ACS; see also Minervi, "Between the Italian Authorities and the Jewish Refugees." For the process of absorbing the refugees into Italy during summer 1945, see Yoav Gelber, *The Standard Bearers: The Mission of the Volunteers to the Jewish People* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1983, pp. 440–444.

5 For discussion of this problem, see Jacob Markovizky, *Beginning of Spring [Primum Verum]: The Center for the Diaspora in Italy 1944–1948* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1997 (hereafter Markovizky, *Primum Verum*), pp. 12–14.

6 Correspondence between Ministry of the Interior and the Prefecture in the frontier areas, 1946–1947, File of Interno Gabinetto, Ebrei Stranieri 1946–1951, A/16, Busta 19, ACS.

fore, whatever success the Jewish refugees did achieve in their struggle to enter Italy illegally was due largely to the friendly attitude of the Italian government — an attitude which prevailed despite its apparent openness to British policies.⁷ Limited legislation presented a problem because of the left-wing parties who were partners in the coalition government's objections to Britain's White Paper policy which prevented the homeless Jews from entering Palestine.⁸ Noel Charles, the British ambassador in Rome, suspected that Alcide de Gasperi, the Italian coalition Prime Minister since 1945, would be unable to get this legislation (which was also opposed by the United States) passed.⁹

Despite Charles' views, the British authorities did try to influence the Italian government to prevent the entry of Jewish refugees into Italy. The British Foreign Office believed that entry into Italy of Jewish refugees would endanger public order, overcrowd the already cramped refugee camps, and lead to the creation of a clandestine immigration organization dedicated to illegal immigration into Palestine.¹⁰ According to a British Intelligence assessment during the winter of 1946, as many as 25,000 Jewish refugees would infiltrate into Italy, especially from the American-occupied territories in Austria.¹¹ They suspected that the agents of the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community in Palestine) were using forged travel documents either to pose as representatives of international aid organizations relocating and rehabilitating the refugees, or to act as soldiers of the Allied Forces. These organizations were authorized to issue travel documents and were therefore able to smuggle refugees into Palestine. The uniforms worn by officials of the social welfare organizations when they crossed the borders were used by the members of the "flight and rescue" (*Bricha*) organization in their efforts to bring the refugees into Italy. This undermined the efforts of the Italian Border Police to ascertain the authenticity of the uniforms and the travel documents.¹²

7 British Ambassador in Rome to Renato Prunas, the General Secretary of the Italian Foreign Ministry, 78.177.46, 11 September 1946, ACS.

8 See Noel Charles to the Foreign Office, telegraph 1322, 23 August 1946, Public Record Office, London (hereafter PRO) FO371/57694.

9 Ibid.

10 British Embassy to Renato Prunas, 78.177.46, 11 September 1946, ACS. Regarding the complicated situation among the uprooted refugees' camps in Italy at that time, see Gelber, *Standard Bearers*, pp. 444–445; Markovizky, *Primum Verum*, pp. 14–28.

11 On the British assessment (which seemed exaggerated), see the letters of the General Secretary of the Foreign Office to the head of the Cabinet of the Italian Ministry of the Interior (Il Capo di Gabinetto), 8 September 1946, 4 October 1946, Cable 45395/130, A/16, ACS.

12 Report of the Joint Allied Commission; Memorandum of the Ministry of Interior, summer 1946, Busta 254, Fascicolo 24855, ACS.

An example was the activity of Danny Laor (Lichtenstein), a member of the *Bricha* movement, who was based at the central point of infiltration on the Austrian-Italian border in the district of Merano. Because of the difficulties of the snow-covered Alps passes, he searched for a more convenient route for the refugees. Dressed in the guise of an American captain looking for a convalescent site to rehabilitate American officers wounded at the front prior to their being sent home, Laor reconnoitered most of the Alps passes for many days, and finally decided upon the Predoi-Cesare area, about 150 kilometers from Merano. Laor employed local farmers to widen the Alpine passes and, with the help and cover of the local inhabitants, refugees from Austria were smuggled into Italy. The luggage of the Jewish refugees was masqueraded as that of returning soldiers after their service in Europe, and was transferred by military vehicles along the Brenner-Pass at the top of the Alps. Some 5,000 refugees were transferred in this way.¹³

This example illustrates the futility of British efforts to stop the infiltration. The British Foreign Office in the summer of 1946 decided to conduct its own check of the northern border passes. In their report the British officials deplored the way the Italian border police checked travel documents, and they reported that both police officers and border guards were not doing enough to prevent illegal immigration into Italy. They demanded once again that the Italian Ministry of the Interior take measures to stop the massive entry of the Jewish refugees into Italy. The British were concerned that the illegal entry would undermine political and social stability in Italy and would strengthen the illegal refugees' resolve to immigrate to Palestine.¹⁴

The Italian Ministry of the Interior was aware of these accusations, but did not feel responsible, since they were doing everything possible to stop the infiltration of illegal immigrants, especially in those areas under British control, i.e. the Austrian-Italian border areas. They claimed that budget restrictions prevented the employment of additional manpower to strengthen the Italian border police, and pointed out that until 1946 the border-check stations were actually under the jurisdiction of the Allied Forces, and therefore local authorities were not in a position to interfere. This change of roles under the Italian responsibility would enable the government to make a serious effort to stop the entry of illegal immigrants at its borders.¹⁵

13 Testimony of Danny Laor, project no. 4, Testimony No. 35, Section for Verbal Documentation and the Institute for Contemporary Judaism, Jerusalem, pp. 4-7; see also Sami Levy to Moulia (Ben Haim), 20 August 1948, c 12/9/10, HA.

14 British Ambassador to the Foreign Office, 8 September 1946, Busta 130, Fascicolo 41179, ACS.

15 Italian Ministry of the Interior to the Joint Allied Commission, 8 August 1946, Busta 130, Fascicolo 41170/130, ACS.

The Italian reply did not satisfy the British authorities. In autumn 1946 the British pressed for a more strict control of the Italian Security forces in order to stop the entry of unauthorized refugees into the country.¹⁶ Dr. G. Migliore, head of the Public Security Department (Direzione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza), DGPS, the Public Security of the Ministry of the Interior in Italy, decided to personally examine the British accusations by touring the border points in the Bolzano-Ressia area. Migliore instructed the command of the border police to strengthen supervision of illegal immigration.¹⁷ Despite his admonishment, however, no new instructions were issued, and no additional forces or other reinforcements were employed to prevent illegal immigration. It should be stated that given Italy's difficulties and dilemmas in foreign, social and economic affairs at home after World War II, the question of the Jewish refugees' illegal immigration was not an overriding issue.

The Italian government was displeased with the presence of so many refugees in its territory, even though the Jewish refugees represented only a small social class among many other refugees and displaced persons from Yugoslavia and other eastern European countries. The Italian government demanded again and again that the Allied authorities relieve them of this burden, which they said constituted a security and political risk and an economic hardship. They sent a dispatch with the message:

*It is necessary in the near future to disperse this group for social, economic and political reasons since they constitute a burden on the authorities, and serve as a bad example for the state's citizens.*¹⁸

The Italian government was aware of the importance that the British government attributed to its struggle against what it regarded as illegal Jewish immigration into Palestine. Furthermore, officials of the Italian Foreign Office and the Ministry of the Interior claimed that the southward flow of Jewish refugees to the Adriatic ports was causing many difficulties for

16 British Embassy in Rome to the General Secretary of the Italian Foreign Ministry, 78 177 46, 11 September 1946, ACS.

17 See Reports of the P.S.; Busta 19, a/16, ACS. The orders were routine and were addressed to the commanders of the frontier stations, especially in the Bolzano area. Directives to the border police (Polizia di Frontiera) are specifically emphasized in several letters of correspondence between the Command of the Border Police in the Bolzano and the DGPS, April-December 1946, ACS.

18 Dispatch from the Italian Foreign Office to the British Embassy in Rome, 7 October 1946, Affari Politica (AP) 1946-1950, Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Roma (hereafter ASMAE).

the country. These difficulties added to existing economic problems by creating angry confrontations and incidents of physical violence at the peripheral refugee camps and centers all over the country. These problems were constantly recurring in those areas during the period after World War II.¹⁹

With these hardships in mind, Mr. Francisco Frasoni, the Italian Secretary General of the Foreign Office emphasized that the Italian government, like the British government, was interested in solving the Jewish refugee problem in Italy. But, in reality the local authorities were unable to stop the waves of infiltration through the borders in the north, especially during the summer. They blamed the arrangements of the Peace Treaties, which denied the Italian government the right to maintain a proper army or police force at the border to deal with these waves of refugees flooding the country. The Italian Foreign Office demanded, therefore, that the Allies offer assistance in transferring refugees from all over Italy, or else actively prevent their entry into the country, in any way necessary, even if it meant taking drastic measures.

One of the main targets of the British in their struggle against the illegal migration of the Jewish refugees to and from Italy were the welfare organizations, such as the United Nation Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), some of whose employees helped the representatives of *Ha'mossad Le'aliya Bet*, the Mossad (the illegal immigration movement), and the security branches of the *Yishuv* throughout Italy. The benevolent attitude of the Italian authorities towards those humanitarian organizations caused the British government considerable anxiety. In their opinion the refugee camps' inhabitants, organized by the Joint, were the main source of illegal shipments of newcomers to Palestine.²⁰

The entry of illegal immigrants into Italy increased at the beginning of 1947 and peaked during February–March 1947, when more than 2,500 refugees entered Italy mainly through its northern frontier. The officials of the Italian Ministry of Interior estimated that “most of the refugees were organized by a skilled international team which oversaw the refugees’ departure for Israel.”²¹ The memorandum referred to activities under the

19 On the social and economic difficulties of the refugees in Italy, see Foreign Office to the Head of the Cabinet of the Ministry of the Interior, 4 October 1946, Busta 130, Fascicolo 45395, ACS. See also Command of the Carabinieri to the Ministry of the Interior, 1 September 1946, Busta 34 Fascicolo 2593, Ministero Dell'Interno (1944–1946), ACS. For detailed report on signs of violence during this period, see letter 5134, 30 July 1947, which deals with the “Vigilanza Sugli Stranieri,” DGPS files, ACS.

20 Memorandum of the Ministry of the Interior of 47/18/369, 14 August 1947. Ebrei Stranieri 1946–1950, Busta 20 Fascicolo 7/1, ACS. On the activities of the welfare and rehabilitation organizations in Europe during this period, see M. J. Proudfoot, *The European Refugees 1939–1952*, London, 1957, pp. 95–106.

21 Memorandum of DGPS, 11 June 1947, No. 22/456325, ACS.

auspices of UNRRA, organizing and encouraging the Jewish refugees in Italy. This estimate was corroborated by information spread by the British Authorities that some of the UNRRA officials, especially Jews, were helping the Mossad and the branches of the *Bricha* movement to organize illegal immigration to Palestine.

Spokesmen from the Italian Foreign Office and UNRRA reported that frontier authorities (French, Italian and American) along both sides of the border made it possible for small groups of refugees to cross the border and enter Italy.²² In their opinion, the welfare agencies' officials were not actually organizing the refugees, but their attitude was humanitarian, i.e., they wished to enable the Jews and other refugees living in the no-man's-land between the Italian guards and the American occupied areas of Austria to survive the harsh conditions they were facing, in view of the fact that the American occupying authorities in Austria refused to re-admit them.

The attitude of UNRRA, as reported by the Italian Security Forces, was that the refugees had to be helped on humanitarian grounds, regardless of their political identity and territorial destination. In this situation the Italian authorities' hands were tied. On the one hand, they explained that the frontier police had insufficient manpower to deal with the wave of immigration into the country, especially since the Allies had forbidden Italy to keep a large military and police force which could have handled the complicated border problem; on the other hand, intensive action against the Jewish refugees would have been considered anti-Semitism, particularly when directed against detention camp survivors who enjoyed moral support and the world's sympathy.²³ The situation was even more complicated due to the policies of the American occupying authorities in Austria, who were helping the welfare organizations both financially and physically to transfer the Jews southward to the Italian border. According to a report of the Italian Ministry of Interior, it was assumed that Jewish refugees in Austrian camps would, after prior coordination with the Joint, leave secretly from the camps of Salisbargo and Hallein along the Tyrol and travel in darkness towards Innsbruck, Villach and Saalfelden. There they waited for the Zionist agents to lead them across the border into Italy.²⁴

At the beginning of May 1947, in an attempt to appease the British authorities, Dr. Migliore proposed that all refugees entering Italy be concentrated on the Island of Ustica. The purpose of this action was to prevent

²² Ibid.

²³ Memorandum of Ministry of Interior, 10 April 1947, 47/18/369, ACS.

²⁴ This was a common assumption made by the Ministry of the Interior and the Italian Police forces during 1947; see, for example, Memorandum of the DGPS and FO to Ministry of the Interior, cable 31576 of 9 October 1947, on the activities of the Jewish refugees in Italy: "Ebrei Stanieri in Italia," Busta 19, Fascicolo 4, ACS.

refugees from arriving in the summer of 1947 and joining their friends and families already spread through the displaced persons' camps throughout the country. Migliore thought that it would be possible to concentrate about 6,000 refugees on the island to control their final settlement and eventually to evacuate them in groups from Italy. But he made this proposal conditional upon the consent and readiness of the international welfare organizations or the United Nations to regard the refugees as a unique social category, unlike the refugees who were already taken care of by UNRRA in their camps in Italy, and to control their final settlement and eventually to evacuate them in groups from Italy.²⁵

At the same time in the spring of 1947, the British government demanded that the Italian authorities concentrate their efforts more drastically on the northern frontier in order to stop the waves of refugees who were intending to enter Italy during the summer months. London was furious because it was rumored that Prime Minister Alcide de-Gaspari had assented to the request of Raffaele Cantoni, head of the united Jewish communities in Italy (Unione delle Comunità Israelitiche Italiane, or Unione), to permit the entry of ten thousand Jewish refugees from the Austrian refugee camps into Italy.²⁶ British pressure produced a sharp reaction from the Italian Foreign Office whose Secretary General Francisco Frasoni resented the British attitude. In his opinion, the Italian government was interested in solving the refugee problem in accordance with British considerations, i.e. preventing their entry into Italy, and although it was the responsibility of the Italian government to prevent infiltration, they could not carry out this responsibility because of inadequate police forces. The fact that the United States and France encouraged the illegal movement of the Jewish immigrants from areas under their control helped increase the number of Jewish infiltrators from the North into Italy.²⁷ Identification of the actual infiltration routes that the refugees took into Italy was aided by the uncompromising attitude of the British military authorities in Austria towards the Jewish refugees who were forbidden to approach nearer than 15 kilometers from the frontier area. The British also reinforced their forces in the area and employed informers in zones where Jews concentrated, especially in displaced

25 Report on the discussion between Migliore and K.S. Benton, 28 May 1947, PRO FO/371/61813, E5596. For the activities of UNRRA in the camps in Italy and the involvement of the Yishuv's emissaries, see Markovizky, *Primum Verum*, pp. 20–22.

26 FO to Ministry of the Interior, cable 31576, 9 October 1947.

27 Refugee Department in the FO to Ambassador in Rome, 12 March 1947, PRO FO 371/66733. The rumors were baseless. During this time Cantoni did not ask for formal entry quotas for the Jewish refugees. Actually, such a request was made only in April 1946, during the La-Spezia incident when Cantoni asked for entry visas for 3,000 Jewish refugees. For a more comprehensive discussion of this problem, see Sergio Minerbi, *Raffaele Cantoni: Un Ebreo Anticonformista*, Assisi-Roma, 1978, pp. 173–177.

persons' camps in southern Austria. In the opinion of the British Occupation Force in Austria these policing methods proved to be successful, and the Jewish refugees did not move southward through these areas, but preferred the areas occupied by French and US forces which they deemed more convenient for passage, given the compassionate behavior of the US occupation force.²⁸

The British occupation forces in Austria and the British Foreign Office held the Italian government responsible for the mass entry of Jewish refugees into Italy.²⁹ Britain claimed that only the planned, strict attitude of the Italian authorities, the reinforcement of the frontier police and the employment of additional measures, would make it possible to successfully deal with the phenomenon of infiltration. Since the Italian units lacked both the will and capability to combat this, the British government expressed its readiness to help the Italians find ways to coordinate their efforts and consolidate the future deployment of forces.³⁰

It was clear to both the British occupying forces and the members of the Joint Council of the Allies in Austria that only a strong Italian protest lodged with the military authorities in Austria would mark the beginning of the fight against the infiltration of the refugees into Italy. The British authorities complained that the French and US forces in Austria encouraged the southward movement by neglecting border controls and claiming that it was Austrian territory. The main problem was the Bolzano area, an area well-known to the Joint Enquiry Commission of the Allies acting during the spring and summer of 1947 in the Italian-Austrian border region, into which the refugees infiltrated from French occupied territory in Austria. According to the Commission's findings, these refugees enjoyed extensive help in the Merano region and the center of their activities was the sanatorium for chronically ill patients, and the various convalescent homes in the town and its vicinity.³¹

The Enquiry Commission estimated that most of the illegal refugees infiltrated during the summer months, especially August when more than 2,500 Jews crossed the border in the area of the Krimml-Tauri pass and more than 500 Jews crossed the border in the Brenner-Pass and the Tubre area (west of Resia) near the Swiss border.³² Hundreds of refugees managed to cross this border despite the fact that the Krimml-Tauri pass was usually

28 Memorandum of the Italian Foreign Office, 10 April 1947, PRO, FO371/61811, E 5176.

29 Report of the Joint Allied Commission. The Ministry of the Interior to the Italian FO, 9 October 1947.

30 Report of the Joint Allied Commission.

31 Ibid.

32 Charles to Sforza, 3 June 1947, PRO, FO 371/G1811, E 5175. Report of the Joint Allied Commission; see also the secret memorandum, "On the infiltration of Jews into Italy," 14 August 1947, 369/18/47, Busta 20, Fascicolo 7/1, A/16, ACS.

strongly guarded by the Carabinieri. The report of the committee did not agree with the Italian authorities' opinion that the topography of the terrain made it difficult to control infiltration. It was the committee's opinion that the main cause for this was the inefficiency of the unit in charge of the Krimml zone in setting up patrols and tracking vehicular movement, especially those carrying the symbol of AJDC (the Joint). Another sign of failure was the refusal of the commanders of the Carabinieri in the Casere area to engage in night patrols, since they had, in fact, been bribed by Austrian smugglers acting for Jewish institutions. The bribes included wine, food and cigarettes, supplied by the Joint.³³

On foggy days or during snowfalls, the activities of the Jewish organizations shifted from the Tauri-Krimml area to the Resia area and the Brenner-Pass, where infiltration into the country was easier. Here as well more efficient policing by the Italian security authorities could have halted the infiltration. In addition to the lack of tactical activity mentioned above, small groups of Jewish refugees also entered Italy with forged documents as Joint employees or as Austrian citizens visiting Italy. This infiltration was carried out with the cooperation of Italian army officers and the administration positioned on the Border Control Stations in the Brenner Pass and in Resia.³⁴

S. P. J. Ruck, a British expert who had been sent to check the methods of control of the Italians at the Italian Austrian border, stated in the report he presented to the Italian authorities that the attempts of the border guards to stop the stream of infiltration had failed, because although their methods were adequate to deal with simple infiltration or small groups, the Jewish immigration was organized and had at their disposal means superior to those of the border guards. Thus, the ordinary preventive steps were not, according to Ruck, effective enough to deal with this type of immigration.³⁵

The report of the Central Committee of the Allies made the following recommendations: 1) To strengthen the ties between the Italian Foreign Office and the border police and to carry out the policy of the Foreign Office regarding the illegal entry of refugees into Italy. 2) To increase the salary of the border guards and supply them with vehicles suitable to mountain terrain. 3) To call the special Forces of the Carabinieri, trained for this specific task in every encounter with or possible interception of illegal refugee movements. 4) To grant the border police special authority to act belligerently, in order to enable them to carry out their task effectively.³⁶

33 See HQ of the Carabinieri to the Ministry of the Interior, 15 July 1947, DGPS Files, ACS.

34 See Border Police to GHQ, Ministry of the Interior Files, July 1947, Busta 19, A/16, ACS.

35 See letter of the Carabinieri Command to the Ministry of Interior, 15 July 1947, DGPS Files, ACS.

36 Report of Count Schoki to Zoffi, 15 July 1947, Busta 19, A/16, ACS.

Based upon these proposals of the Central Commission and their recommendations, orders were issued to the branches of the border personnel to intensify their efforts to capture illegal refugees. Special emphasis was given to the Bolzano-Resia zone, which was reinforced with several elite Forces of the Carabinieri to supply a suitable tactical reply to the infiltration of refugees and illegal immigrants into Italy.³⁷

The British attempts to change Italy's basic attitude and their operational capability to stop the waves of immigrants entering across the northern border did not succeed. Most of the above-mentioned steps which the British demanded were not carried out, and the Italians used the traditional arguments of lack of manpower, the American authorities' reluctance to alter their policies in Austria, etc. Hence the Italian border guards "de facto" continued to carry out their daily routine activity which had been assailed by the Control Committee.³⁸

From the reports of the units who had been attached to the border guard, we learn that, despite British demands, the units employed a different policy and did help small groups of Jews to enter Italy. In this way tens of refugees crossed the border in the area of Valle-Aurina near Bolzano under the supervision of UNRRA with the justification that these refugees would soon be sent to the United States for medical treatment.³⁹ Hundreds of refugees arrived during June and July 1947 at the "Jewish" sanatorium in Merano for convalescence and treatment due to the horrors of war and the hard life in the refugee camps in Austria.⁴⁰

The involvement of the security force and the aid given to the Jewish refugees in the Austrian Tyrol had been known to the Italian authorities for a long time.⁴¹ However, no actual attempts were made to prevent the infiltration of refugees by arguing that UNRRA aid was needed.⁴²

By analyzing the border control of the security police and its branches, we learn that an unequivocal policy with a specific attitude towards the Jewish refugees did not exist. Local commanders who asked for specific instructions from the Ministry of the Interior were told that only the field commander

37 Recommendation of the Joint Allied Commission; see also interim report sent to the British FO, August 1947, PRO, CO 371/61854.

38 Report of the Joint Allied Commission.

39 Command of the Carabinieri (Bolzano) to the Ministry of the Interior, 26 August 1947, report 346/222, Fascicolo 14105, Busta 80, ACS; see also Captain Bianco to the General Command of the Carabinieri, 30 August 1947, *ibid*.

40 The daily routine activities are described in the report of "Prefectura di Milano Alla Prefectura di Bolzano," 8 August 1947, a/16, ACS.

41 Report of the Joint Allied Commission; regarding the pressure from the British, see also Noel Charles to the Italian Foreign Minister, f.l. Busta 18, A/16, ACS.

42 Telegram from the Frontier Guard to the Ministry of the Interior, /650, 18 22830, June 1947, DGPS Files.

would make decisions regarding the fate of the refugees. Refugees who were caught were neither arrested nor imprisoned, but stopped and escorted back by the guards to the point where they had crossed the border. They were offered hot tea or a small breakfast to revive them after the hardship and difficulties of the journey. Some of the Italian commanders sympathized with the refugees knowing that they would repeat their attempts to enter Italy through another nearby pass or even by the same roads.⁴³

Though the OICs, the border guards in the Dolomites sector, reported in their memorandum that 3,854 refugees were caught in the summer and autumn of 1947, this was done only in order to emphasize the routine nature of their task. Most of these refugees were returned to Austria but eventually re-entered Italy, increasing the Jewish refugee population there at that time.⁴⁴ The Italian authorities asked the British to send an expert to supervise the implementation of the report of the Joint Allied Commission and to act as liaison officer between the Italian border authorities and the French and British occupying forces in Austria.⁴⁵

The visit of the Italian Foreign Minister (Sforza) and the head of the political section in Sforza's Office (Vittorio Zoppi) to the British Foreign Office in October 1947 was supposed to ease the tension and conflict between the two states that arose out of London's dissatisfaction with Rome's lack of effort to implement the Ruck report, mentioned above. The British officials expressed their willingness to help the Italian government in their struggle against illegal immigration into Italy,⁴⁶ but this encouragement did not bring about an actual change in the policy of the central government in Rome towards the Jewish illegal immigrants who were infiltrating into Italy from the north. On the contrary, the Italian authorities were pointedly and clearly aware of the organization and the methods of activity of both the secret branches of the *Bricha* organization, including the

43 HQ of the Carabinieri (in Merano) to the Interior Ministry, 15 July 1947, DGPS Files, ACS.

44 On the numerous activities of UNRRA in Austria, see the letters of the Italian political representative in Vienna to V. Zoppi, 13 March 1947 and 10 April 1948, f.l. Busta 18, A/16, ACS.

45 I do not intend to elaborate on the involvement of the welfare and rehabilitation agencies in covering up the illegal activities of the *Yishuv* in Italy. For a more detailed comment, see Charles (from Rome) to the Foreign Office, 9 April 1947, and Charles to Wilkinson, 18 April 1947, PRO, FO 371/61804 E 3012/48/31 G; see also Idith Zertal, *From Catastrophe to Power: Jewish Illegal Immigration to Palestine 1945–1948* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1996, pp. 380–388.

46 See the reports of the Carabinieri HQ to DGPS, 30 July 1947, quoted in letters from Prefecture of Bolzano to Ministry of the Interior, April–October 1947, Busta 80, Fascicolo 14105, ACS.

Zionist underground, and the international humanitarian organizations that were helping illegal Jewish refugees infiltrate into Italy and assisting them in their rehabilitation as an intermediate stage before their departure for Palestine.

From a secret memorandum which was circulated among officials involved in dealing with the refugee question, we learn how well aware the Italian authorities and the security branches were of the organization and activities of the Jewish refugees on their journey from southern Austria to Italy.⁴⁷ The memorandum refers to an extensive, intelligent underground organization financed by the Zionist movement whose goal was to transfer as many Jewish refugees and uprooted Jews as possible to Palestine. This activity was financed and aided by funds supplied by Jewish institutions who maintained camps and convalescent homes in the Bolzano Prefecture area that helped to prepare refugees for their journey southward to the ports from which they would be shipped illegally to Palestine. The memorandum refers to the main escape route through the Casere area, in the Aurina Valle, and to the base of the Tauri pass, which were the main paths used by the *Bricha* organization. However, despite the constant pressure from the British Embassy in Rome demanding the prevention of entry of refugees from the Austrian area, which constituted the main stream of people for illegal immigration to Palestine, no reference was made to the need to prevent the transit of the refugees.⁴⁸

The document which pinpoints the Merano area as the center of the illegal activity of the Zionist *Bricha* movement,⁴⁹ implies that there was an unwritten agreement between the central authorities in Italy and the Zionist and humanitarian organizations which allowed unobstructed entry into Italy and rehabilitation of the refugees at the camps. As a consequence of this unwritten agreement at this period during 1947, the Italian government carried out a liberal policy towards the refugees traveling south to join the other refugees, crowded in the camps, en route to Palestine.⁵⁰ The document indicates that the officials of the Ministry of the Interior and the Italian Police tried to do everything possible to facilitate the entry of the Jewish refugees into Italy. It is clear that the Italian army, police and ordinary citizens in the area of Farado-Cassara-Meranoto assisted the *Bricha*

47 Report of the Carabinieri HQ to DGPS, 30 November 1947, *ibid*.

48 Victor Malet, the Ambassador in Rome, to the FO, no. 2007, 18 October 1947, PRO FO/371/68150 PRO, E9800.

49 Ward to FO, telegramma 941, Roma, 8 October 1947, PRO FO 371/61850, E 9432/84/31.

50 Secret memorandum of the Ministry of the Interior, 365/18/47, 14 August 1947, Busta 20, Fascicolo 7/1, A/16, ACS. This memorandum refers to the information and the relevant data which were supplied by the British Embassy in Rome as operational preventives to cope with the problem of illegal infiltration of refugees, especially the Jews.

movement, and ensured the success of the difficult operation despite the difficult routes, abysses, snow storms and dark nights.⁵¹

Britain's continuing political pressure on Rome during the summer months of 1947 which aimed at preventing or reducing the number of Jewish refugees entering Italy caused the Italian Ministry of the Interior to formulate an attitude paper analyzing the situation of the Jewish refugees and the question of their subsequent illegal immigration from Italy. The Italian government pointed out that the problem was complicated and beyond the power of the local authorities to deal with, since several other countries were involved, especially in the occupied areas of Austria; and, although it was true that the Italian government was interested in preventing the entry of illegal refugees into Italy, in general, it was also aware of Italy's internal social, economic and political difficulties. Thus, only Britain's intervention could provide for a more energetic Italian policy to cope with such circumstances.

Italy's attempts to avoid any direct action, both on the strategic and tactical levels, concerning the specific problem of Jewish refugee infiltration, led to increased British pressure for they fully understood the motives, constraints and reasons that guided the Italian government in their policy toward the Jewish refugees. These were formulated in a British report made in December 1947, based on the conclusion of an Inquiry Commission that dealt with the conditions of the Jewish refugees in Italy. Noel Charles, the British Ambassador to Rome presented the conclusions of this report to Zoppi and Migliore.⁵² According to British sources it states that Zoppi reprimanded Migliore about the unsatisfactory action and control carried out in regard to supervising the activities of the Joint organization in Italy. Migliore's answers focused on expected and routine explanations, notably the lack of means to carry out the supervision. According to this source, Zoppi promised Charles that the Italian government had decided to adopt new ways of action using diverse means to stop the infiltration of the illegal refugees. The British, however, maintained that not only were the Italian authorities not making (or avoiding making) any effort to stop this phenomenon but were even afraid of introducing drastic measures, since any

51 On the activities of the *Bricha* movement in this area, see Shlomo Class, *The Bricha Movement, 1944-1948* (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv, 1994, pp. 268-270. See also Gelber, *The Standard Bearers*, p. 669. Class claims that Italy never obstructed transports of refugees (p. 270); however, delays occurred and certain groups, some hundreds of refugees, were arrested and sent back to Austrian territory. See also Secret memorandum of the Ministry of the Interior, 365/18/47, 14 August 1947, Busta 20, Fascicolo 7/1, A/16, ACS; and Minervi, "Between the Italian Authorities and the Jewish Refugees."

52 Memorandum of the Ministry of the Interior, 27 August 1947, "Immigrazione Clandestina in Italia," Busta 20, Fascicolo 771, A/16, ACS.

attempt to act against the Jewish refugees might cause their fingers to be burnt. Charles continued that a change in the political climate in Italy would enable the Italian police to carry out proper measures against the refugees.⁵³

This change did not materialize and Fransoni, the general secretary of the Italian Foreign Office, persisted in telling the British that, despite the good will of the Italian authorities, they were unable to stop the flow of Jews immigrating southward. These Jews were supported by wealthy organizations and were well experienced in evading the supervision of sundry police forces in Eastern and Central Europe. Moreover, they frequently even misled the British forces and reached Palestine. The traditional arguments of scarce manpower and lack of technical resources were reiterated apologetically by Fransoni.⁵⁴

The outbreak of hostilities in Palestine at the end of 1947 changed the activity of the *Haganah* (the *Yishuv* underground armed forces) in the Diaspora for now it became necessary to train reliable manpower for the armed struggle in Palestine. The main human resource for this purpose were the Jewish refugees who lived in the camps of displaced persons and in the *kibbutz* training farms throughout Italy. Due to the new circumstances the need arose to enlarge the cadres of manpower trained by *Haganah* members and thus increase the movement of refugees from the northern border by the escape route.⁵⁵

For these reasons the *Bricha* movement activity in the mountain passes of the northern border expanded. Public opinion in Italy was moved by the

saga of the tortured, rescued from the Hell, annihilation and the concentration and forced labor camps. Jews who had set out on a mass exodus from Poland and other East European countries, had passed through refugee camps in Germany and Austria, and were continuing on their way south in order to fulfill their destiny — to immigrate to Palestine. Groups of youngsters, the aged and young children suffered the considerable physical hardships of the voyage on foot, on dark nights, through mountain passes, covered with snow, in freezing temperatures, hiding themselves and afraid of the Italian border guards.⁵⁶

This poetic description dramatically describes the continuity of the movement of the Jewish refugees in the Austrian border area at the start of

53 Conclusions of the report published on 4 December 1947; see Charles to Bevin, PRO FO 371/61854 E 11716/84/31.

54 Charles to Bevin, *ibid.*

55 For a detailed discussion, see Jacob Markovizky, *A Fighting Ember* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1995, pp. 28–30, 43–45; and Markovizky, *Primum Verum*, pp. 44–50.

56 M. Martin, "La tragedia ebraica fa tappa a Merano," *Unione d'Italia*, 29 January 1948.

1948. The outbreak of the War of Independence forced the British government to demand drastic measures be taken to curb the illegal activity of the *Yishuv* inside Italy. The British tried to convince the Italian authorities in Rome that common interests demanded mutual cooperation. Victor A. Mallet, the British Ambassador in Rome, claimed that the continued illegal activity of the *Yishuv* and the smuggling of arms and ammunition to Palestine would precipitate a deterioration of the military situation in Palestine and lead to civil war and political anarchy. In his opinion under these circumstances, there could be ramifications which would extend beyond the Eastern Mediterranean.⁵⁷

At that time, the Italian authorities did not want to deal differently with the problem of the Jewish refugees. The Italian Ministry of the Interior emphasized the fact that the Italian border guards were unable to cope with a secret, smoothly functioning organization transferring refugees from the refugee camps in Germany and Austria to Palestine, since Italy served only as a country of passage.⁵⁸ The Italian authorities tried to ward off British pressure with their usual array of arguments, stressing that despite all the activity of the network of the organizations of the border police, public security agents, custom officials, *Guardi di Finanza*, and top trained forces of the *Carabinieri*, Italy could not overcome the enthusiastic waves of refugees on their way south through Italy, again arguing that a lack of technical means prevented their capture in the difficult mountainous terrain. The Italian security forces for quite a while were well acquainted with the infiltration paths, most of which originated in the American zone in Austria, mainly the Casere and Posto-Fisso area and through the Tauri pass, but, as in 1947, no drastic action was taken to prevent the infiltration of the Jewish refugees. The rationalizations used by the commander of the border guards the beginning of 1948, showed how the security forces' attention to this problem was marginal, because the refugees regarded Italy only as a temporary passage, and their sojourn in it would not undermine the economic and social life there. The Ministry of the Interior's liberal policy towards the refugees was similar to the American military authority's policy in Austria, which made it possible for the uprooted Jews to move southward to the Italian border. The American occupying authorities refused to let those refugees who had been arrested in Italy or in the French-occupied sector, return to the American sector. This policy encouraged the maneuvering of the *Bricha* migrants entering Italy, and set an example to the officials of the Italian Ministry of the Interior who were in charge of internal

57 See Memorandum of Ministry of the Interior "About the question of Jewish illegal immigration into Italy," January 1948, 7/1, f. Busta 20, A/16, ACS.

58 Mallet to Frasoni, 17 February 1948, PRO ER/371/68517.

security, for finding excuses for their ineffectiveness in blocking the entry paths into Italy, thus echoing the tolerant attitude of the authorities in the American-occupied sector.⁵⁹

The series of claims that were put forward at the outbreak of the War of Independence regarding the ties between the illegal infiltration and the rearmament of the *Haganah* in Italy and the aggravation of the warfare in Palestine, did not change the basic attitude nor the modus operandi of the Italian authorities concerning their policy towards the Jewish refugees.⁶⁰

The Italian officials at the Ministry of the Interior and the administrative security staff did everything in their power to facilitate the entry of the Jewish refugees into the country. It was true that the Italian government could not express its sympathy for the Jewish refugees nor formally announce its willingness to let them enter Italy, since Italy was reluctant to complicate its relations with Britain regarding its international obligations. Added to this was Italy's inferior position compared to Britain and since 1948 its interest in renewing its presence in the Middle East, an attitude expressed by the Italian Foreign Minister Sforza in July 1948 when he said:

As a state that is not a member of the United Nations, Italy is not yet obliged to abandon its traditional policy of friendly ties with the Arab world, nor the sympathy we always had for the Jews, but for a short, mad and unfortunate period of time, the recognition of the State of Israel which we were not asked to extend. The special position of Italy would make the restoration of peace in Palestine difficult.⁶¹

Close to the time of the declaration of the Jewish State on 15 May 1948, the Italian government decided to formulate a clear policy on the refugee problem. This resulted in directions being given to make it desirable to help the refugees during the temporary stay in Italy, before their exit from Italy's ports to Israel their intended destination.⁶²

These directions openly expressed the feelings and behavior which had been publicly declared, and showed the attitude and behavior of Senior Officials in the Italian government in their relations towards the Jewish refugees during the period under discussion.

59 Letter no. 300/67148 from the Commander of the Border Guards (in Bolzano) to Ministry of the Interior, 10 February 1948, 7/1f Busta 20, A/16, ACS.

60 Ibid.

61 Quoted in Sergio Minerbi, *Raffelle Cantoni: Un Ebreo Anticonformista*, Assisi and Roma, 1978, p. 207.

62 Telegram from Foreign Minister to Minister of the Interior, 14 May 1948, AF, Italia, Busta 114, Fascicolo "Sionismo," ASMAE.